

Sublimate:

A Kinesthetic Study in the Fear of Death

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Introduction

Of the emotions experienced by humans, one impacts, mobilizes, and hijacks the body to a larger degree than any other. The intense physical sensations fear presents us with strikes the core of our being to remind us that life is fragile and it can change in an instant. The change from the known to the unknown is felt clearly when we must confront death. The gravity of that unknown impacts our bodily understanding to such a degree that the inevitability of death can dominate conscious and physical attention. Dance offers an ideal arena to examine how the arc of life and death informs our fear and how the inevitability of death is negotiated personally.

Sublimate was a twelve minute dance work staged in the Charlotte York Irey Theater, February 2-4, 2018 on the University of Colorado Boulder campus. In my final BFA work, I explored the phenomenology of fear, human connection and the role of annihilation in distinguishing human consciousness from animal nature. Through an investigation of human and animal fears, I chose to focus on the fear of death to curate kinesthetic movement research of the visceral experiences of fear, discomfort, and dread. Unlike other fearful subjects, death is a phenomenon that all living creatures must face, yet the response to it is highly individualized. I aimed to dive into the depths of the human psyche to unearth the awful as well as the awesome, calling upon viewers to question their own perceptions of their internal and external worlds. In addition to an embodied examination, I drew upon works of literature such as Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*, Sandra Lee Dennis's *Embrace of the Daimon*, Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror*, and Alan Watt's *The Book*. *Sublimate* explored social, cultural, and spiritual concepts of death through movement.

Through my work, I sought to dismantle the current prevailing notions and fears surrounding death by allowing the audience to encounter its embodiment. To achieve this, I facilitated a meditation for my dancers that focused on two concepts: their own fear of bodily death and the degree of their connection with the natural world. I prompted them to reflect on how they situated themselves within nature and what agency they perceived themselves to have when navigating it. My goal was to elucidate an incarnate portrayal of their customarily abstract sense of terror. In its debut, *Sublimate* challenged viewers by investigating the role of spectatorship, disrupting preconceived notions of dance and theory, and physically manifesting fear through movement.

Positionality Statement

Before I begin an explanation and analysis of my work, I must disclaim my positional biases on death and my cultural understanding of the relationship humans have to this natural phenomenon. My study of the fear of death and the creation of *Sublimate* is framed through my Western mindset and education. Many of the statements I make reflect the contemporary attitudes towards death that have emerged out of the industrial revolution. These attitudes have permeated the institutional structures and mainstream prejudices of Western society to shape my personal opinions on the topic. Since I was a young child, I have struggled with my own fear of death and I believe much of my personal anxiety is tied to an industrialized Western mentality. *Sublimate* serves to give theatrical rendering to this mentality and offer a potential, albeit arduous, reckoning.

In focusing my research on Western death anxiety, I was able to utilize my own experience with fear and death while placing my work in conversation with the larger narrative of fear in my culture. I also understood that I was choreographing for a Western audience that was more likely to express similar sentiments towards death as the ones I portray in *Sublimate*. I acknowledge that not all people or cultures hold the views that I assert. There are cultures around the world that have vastly different experiences with death, cosmologies and philosophies that directly oppose those customarily seen in the West. Due to the personal nature of my subject matter, my reliance on universals such as “humans” and “we” should be read as partial assessments, though I do believe that my statements echo the prevailing ideologies present in my research.

Finding *Sublimate*'s Inspiration

When dealing with fear-based subject matter, the chance of veering into the land of campy, Hollywood slasher films is a well-tread and melodramatic option. Rather than simply depicting fear on stage, I had a strong desire to create a piece that evoked genuine uneasiness within the viewer without requiring my entire concept to hinge upon shock value. In her book, *Embrace of the Daimon*, author Sandra Lee Dennis reflects my apprehension in creating a fear-based work, writing, "poor art stops short with what disturbs us and fails to convey the numinosity of the imaginal realm" (Dennis 166). Fear itself is a multifaceted concept which is both personal and universal, necessitating a diverse approach to its embodiment and scope of research. To create a cohesive work with a centralized concept that contained both dynamic

shifts and pulled from varied and distinct aspects of fear, I needed to create three separate sections that addressed pieces of my research individually.

In my preliminary research of fear, specifically of death, I was drawn to Dante's classic depiction of his descent into Hell and his detailed descriptions of the circles he encountered in *Inferno*. Seeking inspiration for a visual portrayal of horror through literature, I was surprised by what caught my eye. Rather than the lower circles depicting torture, sadness, and terror, I became fascinated with Dante's illustration of Limbo; the first circle of Hell. While inferior to Heaven, Limbo is illustrated as a peaceful yet eternally unfulfilled resting place in death. Those sent to Limbo were not necessarily sinners but instead failed to adopt a Christian belief system or get baptized. As a result, Limbo should be seen as the most desirable circle of Hell to end up in, yet as I continued to read *Inferno*, my opinion evolved differently from these assumptions.

In the other eight circles of Hell, there were cycles of events and occurrences. I envisioned a potential for the inhabitants of each circle to develop camaraderie out of shared misfortune. Yet, the residents of Limbo are bound for eternity in a blank abyss. Taking this idea a step farther, I imagined a Limbo that is home to a single person. This empty environment would relegate the sole inhabitant to an existence filled with nothing but their own thoughts in a blank world for eternity. I was interested here in the feeling of isolation and the effects it can have on humans. The fear of being alone can amplify the fear of death and escalate anxiety. For many, the idea of being left alone eternally with one's own thoughts requires us to confront the depths of our own psyche, choices, attachments, motivations, and compulsions. This thought led me to question of what this imagined Hell would look and feel like. My formulation of Limbo

(the final section of *Sublimate*) was the container for sensations, shapes, and textures that explored this concept of empty isolation.

Knowing that I wanted to end in Limbo, I needed to find an entry point for my work. I decided to depict the circle of life - or death in this case - in order to conceptualize the impact of relationships we have with the external world. I chose to highlight the ensemble's social interconnection and interdependence juxtaposed by the sudden isolation of self and purposelessness in my version of Limbo. Beginning with the theme of life and the struggle for survival, I explored how fears of our animal nature coincided with the theme of endurance and how it contributed to our greater fears around death. *Carnis*, the opening section of *Sublimate*, requires the dancers to embody their most primal selves. My six dancers explored animal movement, specifically big cat, primate, and reptile locomotion to access a new, creaturely character. My reliance on animalistic movement in this section prompted my study of the primal human body. The primal self is often repressed in industrialized society and rationalized through our ego. In her book *Sex and Death*, Beverley Clack explains this dissonance between the animal body and the human ego further, stating, "we think of ourselves to be gods but we have genitals and anuses" (Clack, 61). In Clack's assessment, she draws the connection between the abject of the corporal body and the assumed godliness of our ability to reason. As humans, we can see how easy it is to split the instinct from the intellect through our interaction with animals. We realize how similar we are to animals, especially primates, but this knowledge conflicts with the god-like formulation of our identity and definition of humanity. When analyzing fears of animals, we are forced to confront our own mortality. In *Sublimate*'s descent into Limbo, reconciling the animal body and the ego is essential to the breakdown of our fear of death.

Following the struggle for survival in *Carnis*, the descent continues in the section titled *Panvita*, which addresses death and decomposition. This second section focuses on our relationship to nature and where our place in the world lies. The human ego continues to be investigated in *Panvita* through the sensation of awe and our own finite nature.

The sensation of awe is relevant to my study of fear due to its connections to self-negation and the inherent fear that is caused by the realization of our own finitude. Although awe denotes attraction to an object, our emotions become confused in the face of magnitude and the sublime. Awe can be manifested in both the awful and in the awesome, which establishes the root of our emotional confusion. I became interested in the feeling of awe due to the simultaneous attraction and unease that 'awe-inspiring' experiences cause in us. Awe is often referenced when describing vast, natural phenomena such as the night sky, great oceans, mountains, storms, etc. By itself, the feeling of awe does not necessarily lie in fear, but rather in self-negation, a concept which I tie to the experience of awe. I was inspired by Tom Cochrane's assessments of self-negation in his article, *The Emotional Experience of the Sublime*. Cochrane explains, "the sense of self-negation is a sense how physically insignificant, or utterly contingent we are in comparison to the object... Although the experience is focused primarily on the object, to see something as big or powerful is at the same moment to feel small and vulnerable."¹ It is this sense of vulnerability that must be negotiated in the attempt to understand an overwhelming visual or conceptual experience. It is the fear of personal insignificance that contributes to the sensation of awe and the off-shooting sensations of the awful (an introspective sensation causing us to assess our own radical discomfort) and the awesome (the sensation of external attraction

¹ Cochrane, T. "The emotional experience of the sublime." *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 42 no. 2, 2012, pp. 125-148. *Project MUSE*, doi:10.1353/cjp.2012.0003

and admiration). Cochrane goes on to analyze our emotions surrounding the natural world, saying,

Even when looking at the landscape from the top of the mountain, one may feel reduced by the magnitude of the earth. It is the feeling that comes from confronting something inhuman, uncompromising, hostile or just profoundly indifferent. And this can be grasped in a single perceptual experience that startles or overwhelms the spectator, or it can emerge more slowly in contemplation. (Cochrane 130)

Ultimately, awe forces us to conceptualize where we are in relation to the vastness of the universe. This is often a rare experience to have in individual-centric western culture.

I believe that the issue with this egocentrism is not that we ignore our own insignificance but rather that we have lost our sense of connection to the greater scope of the universe. Our ego causes us to be consumed with the individualized self and our immediate future. The ego, therefore, contributes to our fear of death as death strips us of the self and replaces our future with the unknown. Yet, rather than facilitating our obsolescence, death connects us to the natural world and allows us to act as uniquely influential agents in our own environment. When we begin to accept death as a natural and inevitable phenomenon we can start to understand the importance of our short existence. Exposing ourselves to awe can consequently increase the connection we feel to other humans and other elements of the natural world by bringing the ego in check. These connections that we create are integral in helping us to find meaning and motivation to our lives that is not motivated by ego and fear.

Panvita creates meaning in the process of death by diving into the way we self-negate. Taking inspiration from both our attraction and discomfort of the natural world, I explored

human fears of insignificance and being overpowered. These two fears directly relate to the fear of death and contribute to our ego-induced anxiety of meaninglessness when we leave our corporeal existence. Through *Panvita* I identified the line humans draw to differentiate ourselves from the natural realm. Using a combination of organic suspension and release-based movement and unnatural, internally rotated body alignment and irregular, jabbing gestures, I analyzed the detachment present in the body that contributes to this figurative line. The belief that humans are something separate from, and potentially superior to, nature leads to the construction of anthropocentric policies and habits. These directly contribute to our disconnection from animals and nature and the destruction of our environment (a concept I analyze in detail on pages 24-26).

Culminating in *Limbo*, I complete the triptych in the manifestation of fear by addressing our fears of other people. *Limbo* explores the fears connected to our own mind and body as well as our fears of other humans. In *Limbo*, I depict a reconciliation, or lack thereof, of the in-betweenness created in believing ourselves to be above animals and below gods. Rather than understanding that all forms of life and existence are on the same plane, the hierarchy that is established leads to a perpetual limbo state in our place in the world. Linked to the anxiety of separation and isolation, our fear of being ostracized from our central group echos the anxiety of leaving behind loved ones in death. I highlight our fears of human nature and the possibility to turn against one another through a division of the central 'pack' followed by a reformation and subsequent attack of one member. In turning against one of their members, the group of dancers shows the vulnerability caused by isolation in life and how this vulnerability impacts sentiments towards death.

Human psychology is dealt with throughout *Limbo* as the prime subject matter. While we may sometimes believe that our psychology is controllable, this notion is proven wrong time and again. In fact, with the vast majority of our brain functions operating at the autonomic, unconscious level,² we are unaware of most of what goes on in our heads and bodies. This disconnect has the potential to create a fear of our own thoughts and behavior. *Limbo* uncovers what is hidden beneath the surface of conscious thought as the dancers are plunged into empty space. With nothing to occupy them but their own minds in this void, they are sucked into a monotonous repeating gesture phrase and can only break out when propelled by their own momentum and creativity.

Carnis

Clad in silver and black bodysuits, four dancers emerge unexpectedly from amongst the audience to the sound of a siren-like drone. The soundscape, composed by Colin Hill, supported my intention to form a vital, coordinated, and high functioning pack. They crawl over risers and between chairs to enter the performance space. Once the four dancers took the stage, they are joined by two more dancers who dive roll on from the wings. The siren intensifies in volume and pitch as a low bass beat develops underneath. Finally joined as a central pack, the six dancers circle each other, slicing their arms in the air to whip them around before turning towards the audience as if stalking their prey.

Intense red lighting, driving music, and aggressive, primal movement create an environment that attacks the senses as soon as the dancers enter the space. This entrance deviates

² Morsella, Ezequiel, et al. "Homing in on Consciousness in the Nervous System: An Action-Based Synthesis." *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, vol. 39, 2015, doi:10.1017/s0140525x15000643.

from a traditional narrative arc that often dictates a necessity for rising action that builds from a low point of action. It was important for me to disrupt this type of story arc to unsettle my audience from the beginning. In opening with *Carnis*, I created a narrative that began with the climax. Similar to a traditional narrative climax, the work's primary conflict was established in this section. Themes of internal struggle and survival are introduced in *Carnis* and the viewers are directly confronted by the performers through their opening integration in the audience. In preventing viewers from fully acclimating to the environment I was creating on stage before the dancers began to confront them, I challenged the power of the spectator to empower the performers. Beginning *Sublimate* with the integration of dancers and viewers deviated from the voyeuristic spectating model as the performers become spectators themselves. The emerging dancers turn to watch the audience as they enter the space and are aware of the audience's positionality before the audience understands what is going on. I was interested in disrupting how viewers typically become complacent and comfortable in the voyeurism of the proscenium theater setting; the fourth wall dividing what is "real" from what is "performed".

Coined in 1758 by French philosopher and art critic, Denis Diderot, in *Discours sur la Poésie Dramatique*, the fourth wall is a conceptual barrier which separates the world of the performance from the world of the audience. With this separation comes an inevitable psychological distance as the audience identifies dramatic situations which do not pose a 'real' threat to them.³ Disorienting the audience further required me to break this fourth wall to allow immersion into the world of *Sublimate*.

³ Ishizu, Tomohiro, and Yasuhiro Sakamoto. "Ugliness as the Fourth Wall-Breaker." *Physics of Life Reviews*, vol. 21, 2017, pp. 138–139., doi:10.1016/j.plrev.2017.06.003.

In costuming this section of my work, I was inspired by snakes and chose to clothe my dancers in black and silver snakeskin bodysuits. To further accentuate my influence I used black makeup to contour triangle shaped nostrils and elongate the sides of my dancer's mouths. I focused on the symbology of snakes due to the ongoing debate in the scientific community as to whether humans have an 'innate' fear of them. The current research being done is testing to see if humans are born with the fear of snakes since it is among the most common fears in adults.⁴ One leading study's findings conclude that,

Infants at 6 months of age respond with increased arousal, as indicated by pupillary dilation, to spiders and snakes compared with flowers and fish. We suggest that stimuli representing an ancestral threat to humans induce a stress response in young infants.

These results speak to the existence of an evolved mechanism that prepares humans to acquire specific fears of ancestral threats.⁵

However, there is a detrimental status quo bias being employed in this sort of research. In the assumption that what is normal in one's life is actually universal, partiality may impact the way research supports a theory. Assessing that one is predisposed to recognizing an object via pupil dilation is not synonymous with proof of an innate fear. The implication of such a notion suggests that some fears are not learned through experience. Perhaps we have little control over what we are afraid of but the term "innate" suggests that the fear is insurmountably hereditary. Through this study, I became interested in how fear warps our perception of how we interact with the world and causes us to question what is truly a threat. I explored this phenomenon

⁴ Fredrikson, Mats, et al. "Gender and Age Differences in the Prevalence of Specific Fears and Phobias." *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, vol. 34, no. 1, 1996, pp. 33–39., doi:10.1016/0005-7967(95)00048-3.

⁵ Hoehl, Stefanie, et al. "Itsy Bitsy Spider: Infants React with Increased Arousal to Spiders and Snakes." *Frontiers in Psychology*, vol. 8, 2017, doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2017.01710.

choreographically by fluctuating the dynamics of the performer-audience relationship. At times the dancers appear confrontational as if unsettled by being watched from the outside, while other times they are presentational in their movement, inviting the audience to look closer.

I was also attracted to snakes for their ability to morph, shed, and transform; a central theme explored later in my work. The idea of a creature discarding its corporeal body to become a fuller version of itself relates to my conception of a transition from the physical world to the metaphysical or unseen realm. The athleticism and physicality displayed in *Carnis* point towards the struggle for survival and its kinesthetic relationship to the physical world. The transformation that these costumes allowed for becomes visually present later in the work when the dancers abandon these skins for a more simple, stripped-down appearance. In this transition, the dancers embody the snake's transformation in their own way. Since humans cannot discard their own bodies in life as the snake can, I investigate the shedding of the corporeal body in death. By stripping away the dancer's exterior that was seen in the first two sections of *Sublimate* I signify the passing over into another realm.

In tandem with the inspiration I took from snakes, animalistic movement patterns, in general, became central to the structure of *Carnis*. I have always been fascinated by the aesthetic of animal locomotion on humans and have found myself both attracted to the displayed fluidity and ease and unsettled for reasons I could not understand. There was something strange to me in seeing customarily organic animal movement transposed onto a body that did not organically move that way. I wanted to understand my feelings further which led me to discover the *Uncanny Valley*. The Uncanny Valley Hypothesis (UVH) draws on Freud's notion of the uncanny as "the blend of attraction and repulsion we feel for something we can't quite

categorize.”⁶ This notion of the uncanny was employed by Japanese roboticist Masahiro Mori to explain the eeriness and discomfort viewers felt when witnessing or interacting with quasi-human⁷ creatures. Introduced in the 1970's, Mori hypothesized that as an object increasingly takes on the likeness of a healthy human the reaction becomes increasingly empathetic. That is, however, until the level of affinity toward the object dramatically drops off into a valley of discomfort, only to increase again at the sight of a healthy human.⁸ Animation shows this effect quite clearly. Humans enjoy seeing anthropomorphized creatures like Winnie the Pooh because they bear similarities to humans but not enough to enter the realm of the uncanny. Even more human-like animations, such as the characters in Pixar's *The Incredibles*, are familiar and enjoyable as their likeness suggests humanity yet the body proportions of the characters are augmented, clearly not trying to portray a real being. The effect occurs when the being is visibly not human yet the proportions and human likeness are nearly that of a healthy person. Pixar's groundbreaking animation *Tin Toy* (1988) utilized CGI to create its baby character, Billy. Billy has been the subject of many tests for the validity of UVH due to his unnerving likeness to a live human baby that teeters on the edge of realistic and constructed.⁹

Mori also addresses the effect movement can have on the level of discomfort we feel in the Uncanny Valley. As movement is one of the fundamental ways we recognize each other, the

⁶ Hamilton, James R. “The ‘Uncanny Valley’ and Spectating Animated Objects.” *Performance Research*, vol. 20, no. 2, 2015, pp. 60–69., doi:10.1080/13528165.2015.1026731.

⁷ A common fantasy trope, “quasi human” refers to a being with human qualities or characteristics that does not conform to the archetype of humanity. In Mori’s sense, a quasi human could be an android robot with familiar features such as a human-like face and voice. In my personal work, I draw upon an aesthetic sense of the quasi human through an application of animal movement on a human body in order to transform what is visibly human into a creature that is “Other”.

⁸ Mori, Masahiro, et al. “The Uncanny Valley [From the Field].” *IEEE Robotics & Automation Magazine*, vol. 19, no. 2, 2012, pp. 98–100., doi:10.1109/mra.2012.2192811.

⁹ Ho, CC. & MacDorman, K.F. *Int J of Soc Robotics* (2017) 9: 129.
<https://doi-org.colorado.idm.oclc.org/10.1007/s12369-016-0380-9>

movement of a creature has a profound impact on our perception of its threat level. The presence of movement

changes the shape of the uncanny valley graph by amplifying the peaks and valleys. For illustration, when an industrial robot is switched off, it is just a greasy machine. But once the robot is programmed to move its gripper like a human hand, we start to feel a certain level of affinity for it. (In this case, the velocity, acceleration, and deceleration must approximate human movement.) Conversely, when a prosthetic hand that is near the bottom of the uncanny valley starts to move, our sensation of eeriness intensifies.¹⁰

While this fascinating hypothesis has been primarily applied to robotics, animation, and video game design, I was interested in how UVH would translate on the live performing body. Since UVH relies on spectator perception and a recognition of the human form, I thought dance may be the perfect medium to explore the creation of a live Uncanny Valley. A challenge I faced with this was that the Uncanny Valley is commonly felt when a viewer is able to see the details of features that evoke an uncanny recognition of the human form. Although I played with dancer proximity to the audience, I could not create the same uncanny feature recognition for all audience members due to the configuration of a proscenium stage. Therefore, rather than choreographing humans to distort existing human movement patterns, I fused animal locomotion and primal human movement to make the familiar strange.

Starting in *Carnis*, I applied creaturely movement to disrupt the perception of my dancers. In the development of my primal movement vocabulary, I took inspiration from Ido Portal technique, which places emphasis on learning animal locomotion to place the mover in a

¹⁰ Mori, Masahiro, et al. "The Uncanny Valley [From the Field]." *IEEE Robotics & Automation Magazine*, vol. 19, no. 2, 2012, pp. 98–100., doi:10.1109/mra.2012.2192811.

state of heightened awareness through tactile engagement. This technique is seen through my use of dive rolls, quadrupedal crawling, and primate and reptile locomotion. Allowing my dancers to access primal movement pathways was necessary to deconstruct any existing, more human movement habits in the body.

I also took inspiration from the traditional Māori haka dance. Traditionally a war display and intimidation tactic, the haka is a fully embodied dance which makes use of the voice, face and tongue, bodily percussion, and low, grounded stances.¹¹ I was specifically inspired by the use of the face in the haka as it is one of the most prominent signifiers of aesthetic emphasis of the dance. Aesthetic choices such as the extreme widening of the eyes, gnashing of teeth, and flashing of tongue create a primal tone for the movement. The dancers needed to challenge the audience throughout this section, making proximity a crucial factor in this choreography. By making the dancers approach the audience, hold eye contact, and flash adversarial expressions, I continued my investigation into breaking the fourth wall and disrupting a familiar perception of the body.

Facial expressions were crucial to the development of *Carnis* as they served a purpose for both dancers and audience. For the dancers to use intense facial expressions was a test of their own ego. The face is often neglected in contemporary concert dance as a choreographic platform and I have observed a hesitation in some dancers to access this part of movement expression. Personally, I saw this hesitation in my own cast in their reluctance to integrate antagonistic expressions in the rehearsal process and on stage. I noticed the ensemble's discomfort in embodying an ugly or disfigured aesthetic and found it difficult to encourage the release of a

¹¹ Clément, V. (2017), Dancing bodies and Indigenous ontology: what does the haka reveal about the Māori relationship with the Earth?. *Trans Inst Br Geogr*, 42: 317–328. doi:10.1111/tran.12157

value judgment of choreography. I believe part of this hesitation and discomfort comes from the emphasis that classical Western concert dance has put on "beauty" as the most desirable aesthetic. Facial expressions can therefore also be triggering for spectators since they break this classical ideal.

While I found it difficult to access the Uncanny Valley in a live work, the hypothesis led me to an interesting investigation into how the eerie can be curated on stage. I explored these aesthetics of fear throughout *Sublimate* to create an increased sense of discomfort in my audience. In deviating from classical lines and codified movement, I wanted to design a world that was independent of any preconceptions my audience may have had about concert dance. The dancers were reminiscent of something known, yet disrupted the familiarity of the human body. Uncanniness is understood at the intersection of familiarity and strangeness, a connection I exploit to heighten the otherworldly atmosphere of *Sublimate*.

In the development of an animalistic movement vocabulary, it was important to integrate an animalistic group dynamic. The pack dynamic is similar to that of human group dynamics yet is informed by instinct rather than measured and ritualized social constructs. Affiliation with the pack necessitates conformity for the sake of individual survival and the group support depicted in *Carnis* is one of self-interested endurance. This group is not demonstratively loving yet they are not hostile towards one another without given reason to be. However, the breaking of convention and conformity invokes corrective actions from the pack (this dynamic is analyzed on page 21). A threat is posed to the group when one member disrupts the pack's agenda and the job must be undertaken to either correct their rebelling member or distance the entire pack from the outlier.

To create the pack I worked with the cast in supporting each other in the exploration of their own death. During one of our rehearsals, I lead my dancers through a meditation of their own physical death. The point of this meditation was to prepare the dancers to drop into the animalistic mentality of living in the moment and the negation of their human reason. This meditation helped to identify the ego in our own understanding and fear of death. The meditation also offered an opportunity to discuss our feelings and personal experiences with death in an open platform where each dancer could identify with the stories of the group. It was important for me to have the dancers embody their own emotions of loss, isolation, and obsolescence in this way so they could begin to understand the root of their own sentiments around death in a safe environment.

Following the death meditation, I led the dancers in a movement improvisation intended to differentiate their personality from their enduring and essential sense of self. I gave my cast prompts for dancing using stimulus from their body, mind, and essence (or spirit) independently from the other aspects of their humanity and allowed them to explore how they are fragmented and united within their own identity. This improvisation was influential in allowing the dancers to access the different creatures within the sections of *Sublimate*. I found that this improvisation enabled the dancers to see one another in a new light with these aspects of their inner landscape revealed. When constructing the pack in my cast, each dancer needed to understand the motivation of the others and likewise needed to feel seen within the group. Creating the pack required instinct amongst the dancers and knowledge of each other on a level deeper than the surface of human life.

This meditation and improvisation also happened during a transition time for the cast when one member removed herself from the work and another took her place. I believe that this solidified my final cast and allowed each dancer to feel comfortable in revealing her inner motivations and experiences around this difficult and taboo subject matter. The level of comfort in the dancers around each other aided in my intense exploration of boundaries in relationships when curating a pack dynamic.

Developing the pack and working with my ensemble did not come without challenges though. Preferring self-performed and choreographed solo work, *Sublimate* is the first dance that I have produced on a larger cast. Working with my six dancers gave me the opportunity to discover how best to translate my own movement aesthetic onto the bodies of others. For me, the challenge of this work was fostering an organic adaptation of my movement in a diverse group of movers who desired to have the work explained in depth. I struggled to discern which information was the most important to understand and how much I should be dictating their own journey in the arc of my work. I wanted the motivation for my choreography to come from inside my performers in order to create the intensity that I craved to express. At times I felt as though my movement was simply placed on the dancers rather than instinctively understood. Through trial and error I worked to learn which methods of teaching were the most effective in getting my dancers out of their heads and into their bodies. In my future work with group choreography, I would like to censor myself more in what I revealed of my piece's concept and allow my dancers to experiment more with fusing their own movement qualities with mine. I found that in my rehearsal process I had a tendency to stick to a fast-paced, rigid schedule that did not allow much time for experimentation. Looking back, I believe that I could have aided my dancers in

synthesizing my movement techniques if I had been more fluid with my schedule and open to experimentation within the group. While I am pleased with *Sublimate*'s outcome and the effort put forth by my cast as a first draft, I want to take the knowledge that I have gained through this experience to create future group choreography that matches my vision of intensity and embodied commitment.

One of my methods of inspiring a more organic embodiment of my choreography was to introduce improvisation to the final work of *Sublimate*. Following the pack's challenge towards the audience using facial expressions, the music drops to signal the group's crawling retreat to the upstage right corner. The siren from the beginning of *Carnis* plays again and the dancers began an expansive, individualized frenzy of movement that drew from a final gestural phrase seen in *Limbo*. The gestural phrase that concluded *Sublimate* was inspired by the connection between the physical world and our inner identity. As it is seen in *Limbo*, the dancers remember the struggle of the material world. Yet in *Carnis*, the phrase is abstracted as the individual dancer sees fit. Contrasting from *Limbo*, the dancers operate on a single, rapid dynamic and change levels to travel amongst one another. Here, the phrase signifies the real struggle of physical existence and survival and subsequently dissolves as the members disperse on their own timing to slide to the floor. Their time away from the group does not last long though, as they use a slicing and jabbing movement phrase to reform into a pyramid.

As a group, they now feel confident to advance towards the audience again, this time hunched in a wide stance with shoulders and arms pumping up and down in a primate-inspired provocation. *Carnis* winds down as one dancer begins to revert back to gestures inspired by the phrase that concludes *Limbo*. Her episode physically broke her away from the pack as a

divergent movement was expressed. The other members noticed the afflicted dancer's writhing and internal wringing and quickly distanced themselves from her. They watched from afar, eager to examine and understand the process consuming one of their own. The rest of the pack watched as the soloist struggled and fell inert on the floor. Assessing that the danger had passed, the remaining members of the pack tentatively approached their fallen sister. One at a time, the dancers inspected, nudged, and sniffed the motionless soloist before joining her lying on the ground, becoming afflicted as well.

Transitioning from *Carnis* to *Panvita* necessitated a change in dynamic. The natural successor to the survival of life seen in *Carnis* was death and decomposition; the prime theme of *Panvita*. Similarly, while *Carnis* was informed by animal nature and primal movement, *Panvita* was inspired by the natural world. From natural disasters to disease, the power of nature over living creatures is undeniable. Yet humans often behave as if we can control our environment completely. To create this transition, I was influenced by the techniques that nature has developed to use creatures for the gain of the environment. Upon learning about *Cordyceps militaris* and the effect this fungus has on insects, I found both conceptual ties and movement inspiration for this shift.

C. militaris is a parasitic fungus that infects the minds of insects and turns their bodies into mobile hosts used to gestate and release the fungus's deadly spores. Each of the over 400 species of fungus is specific to the infection of just one species of insect but the methods are often the same. Commonly causing the infected insect to burrow closer to the surface of the soil or climb to a high, sunny place and grip a piece of vegetation for support, *C. militaris* takes over the motor controls of the host until the insect is ideally placed. From there, the fruiting body of

the fungus bursts from the head of the zombified insect to release the spores. With any luck for the fungus, the insect is around more members of its colony, however, some social insects have learned methods to combat this deadly parasite. Through grooming practices, generated fever responses, and removal of dying individuals from the colony, some insects are able to mitigate the casualties caused by these fungi.¹² In taking inspiration from the *Cordyceps* fungi, I wanted to explore the complete embodiment of being consumed by nature and used for purposes outside of our control.

The idea of consumption is also introduced here as a recurring theme in the study of fear. In her article *The Aesthetics of Fear*, Joyce Carol Oates comments, “we are struck by how often anxiety is attached to acts of eating and being eaten: devoured by monsters or by one’s own kind.”¹³ This idea runs through the movement and narrative arc of *Sublimate*, culminating in *Limbo* with a group motivation towards consumption. In relation to *C. militaris*, the aversion to consumption occurs from the thought of being controlled from the inside out by something unseen and of a supposed lower threat.

However horrifying the process of *C. militaris* germination is, the fungus is useful in balancing the insect populations within an ecosystem. The more numerous a certain species of insect is, the more likely the population is to be attacked by their specific *Cordyceps* fungus. Themes of maintaining health in global ecosystems and creating further life and fertilization out of death prepared the stage for the second section of *Sublimate*.

¹² Zheng, Zhuang-Li, et al. “Identification of the Genes Involved in the Fruiting Body Production and Cordycepin Formation Of Cordyceps Militaris Fungus.” *Mycobiology*, vol. 43, no. 1, 2015, p. 37., doi:10.5941/myco.2015.43.1.37.

¹³ Oates, Joyce C. “The Aesthetics of Fear.” *Salmagundi, Saratoga Springs*, no. 188/189, 2015, pp. 159–196., colorado.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.colorado.idm.oclc.org/docview/1764114982?accountid=14503.

Panvita

Contrasting from the primal and aggressive nature of the movement in *Carnis*, the choreography in *Panvita* is slower and more internal. The pack no longer moves as a synchronized group as each dancer enters an individual exploration of awe, ascent, and decomposition. The dancers stumble, fall, and recover as if being controlled by an outside agent. Their movement becomes less presentational and each mover ceases to orient towards the audience. The movement in this section is dazed and transitional, embodying the arc in my narrative of life and death. *Panvita* is situated in between *Carnis*'s struggle for life and *Limbo*'s possibility of an afterlife or rebirth which further facilitates the transitional attitude within the piece.

If thought of linearly, *Panvita* may be the end in the cycle of life as it represents death and a physical reintegration into the earth. However, death is only the midpoint of *Sublimate*. As the dancers begin their journey towards *Limbo* in this section, I ask them to meditate on their experiences of decomposition and renewed life. I continue to take inspiration from fungi in this section of my work and study how their existence is manifested out of the recycling of organisms that have ended their own life cycle. I became interested in the birth of life and beauty out of something at the end of its life.

In my choreography of *Panvita*, I employed the use of focus towards the environment around the dancers, specifically upwards, to convey my exploration in awe. As the choreography progressed, this focus became more internal until it reached a trance-like state with the dancers using their feet to push themselves to the upstage corner and eyes fixed above them. The theme

of this movement centered around being drawn up towards the sky and then being reabsorbed back towards the earth. Culminating in a group section which traverses the ground on the back, the dancers are consumed back into the earth. This section ended with a final transformation, shedding their skin as their physical bodies were reclaimed by the earth and their essences were freed to journey into the realm of *Limbo*.

I became interested in the topic of decomposition upon analyzing the ways that humans can and cannot reintegrate fully into the earth. The body itself is designed to naturally decay and leave no trace on the environment, yet with the invention of technology, humans have left a massive impact on the earth. Humanity is no longer able to fully decompose and leave life without a trace due to the waste that we have produced as a species. Humans have effectively created a new environment to live in by means of man-made construction and, as a result, we find ourselves further removed from our connection to the earth. The fear of death then becomes heightened through the ubiquity of technology as we no longer see ourselves as aspects of the natural world.

The underlying message I am trying to convey in *Panvita* and, on a larger scale, the entire work of *Sublimate*, is the idea that the fear of death becomes heightened through voluntary secession from the natural world. Throughout history, and with specific reference to the dawn of the industrial revolution, humans have become systematically removed from our natural roots for the sake of technological 'progress.' While this progress has enabled some of us to avoid a life of backbreaking pre-industrial labor, malnutrition, and disease, the societal horrors created by a technology-hungry civilization have permeated existence. Environmental destruction, the creation of nuclear weapons, the increasing prevalence of depression and anxiety-related

disorders, and the idolatry of media through the consumption of television and the pervasiveness of the Internet have all been birthed out of this technological ‘progress.’¹⁴ The constructed environment of ‘advanced’ civilization removes death from our everyday experiences, making it taboo in our culture.

We are also removed from our own death through constant innovations to prolong one’s life and the institutionalization of dying individuals through hospice. The fear of death can now be relegated to the doctor’s office where we are not required to encounter it until some time when our health is in question and we really may be dying. It is often unusual to discuss death outside of the realm of medicine and the effects translate to anxiety around our own health in general. The practitioner’s guide to *Treating Health Anxiety and the Fear of Death* validates this, writing, “Modern health care systems deal with health anxiety by offering medical services and tests with the goal of providing reassurance. This strategy may often be successful.”¹⁵ This practice of treating the societal symptom and “providing reassurance” rather than addressing the root of this anxiety continues to successfully keep us passive in our fears while simultaneously creating more personal dread in the moments when we must confront death in ourselves or those around us.

I argue that the only way we can begin reconcile our human fears of death is by limiting our dependence on the artificial and reintegrating with the natural. By dismantling the hierarchy of humans over the natural world we can begin to normalize death. In breaking down anthropocentric institutions, we can confront how this hierarchy contributes to discord in our

¹⁴ Kaczynski, Theodore J.. *Technological Slavery : The Collected Writings of Theodore J. Kaczynski, a.k.a., Feral House*, 2010. ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ucb/detail.action?docID=557394>.

¹⁵ Furer, Patricia, et al. “*Treating Health Anxiety and Fear of Death.*” *Series in Anxiety and Related Disorders*, 2007, doi:10.1007/978-0-387-35145-2.

society, the commodification of other forms of life, and our exploitation of the earth's resources. Consumption and dependence on the artificial reinforces humanity's inability to decompose and aids in narrowing our focus to the exclusive events of our individual lives.

In *Panvita* I put the dancers directly in conversation with their own death and reintegration with nature through decomposition. The journey that *Panvita* facilitates is one that requires a stripping away of the human ego in order to understand one's true place in nature, as a *part* of nature. The human-made hierarchy is dismantled here as creature, nature, and human become indistinguishable from one another. Animal movement blends with human alignment and twisting, spiraling natural structures to create an unfamiliar hybrid. My movement in *Panvita* focuses on sharp, decisive gestures that morph into moments of suspension and release to signify a break down between the fast-paced, artificial world that humans have created and the undomesticated surrender of nature.

Panvita concluded with the group transitioning upstage, some using a momentum-focused improvisation while others pushed their supine bodies along the floor with their feet. Their final transformation out of the material world culminated *Carnis* and *Panvita*. Reconnecting as a group, they aided each other in freeing themselves from the physical skin that ties them to the earthly realm. Revealing worn, white shapeless garments beneath the shiny form-fitting skins they shed, the dancers donned matching white hoods to completely cover their heads. I was interested in using the costuming in this transition to erase the identity of the individual and create beings that were essentially blank canvases.

I encountered several technical issues while creating this transition section due to the lack of rehearsals I had to integrate the costumes with the dancer's movement. Since both the unitards

used in the first two sections and the rompers used in the final section were not ready to use until my last rehearsal before tech week, I was pressed to figure out the most efficient way to get my dancers in and out of their costumes. This struggle was most apparent in finding an artistic way to remove the tight unitards from the bodies of dancers who were already wearing a layer of clothing under them.

I also struggled with getting the dancers in their hoods. While the hoods were situated off stage, I wanted it to look like the hoods were materializing as the layer beneath the unitards appeared. I had to find a way to direct the dancers to go off stage individually while the other dancers took their unitards off. I worked on balancing the action on stage with the absence of one or more dancers off stage. Since my cast was already quite small, it was hard to distract from the dancers exiting the stage. I attempted to combat this by asking the dancers to situate themselves away from the wings and to use more expansive movement while taking the unitards off in the group.

The issues with the hoods continued into *Limbo* with both the difficulties of visibility for my dancers and with the technical elements I had desired to incorporate with the hoods. Up until the final dress rehearsal of *Sublimate* I had the intention of putting small black ‘blood packets’ in the hoods of two of my dancers. These packets would have been punctured during *Limbo* to trigger action within the group to lift the affected dancer. Unfortunately, either the packets would not stay in the hoods long enough for the dancers to move in them or the liquid in the packets was not pigmented enough for the audience to see. This resulted in my elimination of the blood packets from the hoods and my subsequent reliance on movement to convey the story I had wished to tell.

As a choreographic element, breaking the packs would have aided in signaling the rest of the group to move in and correct the afflicted dancer. My idea to include this effect was inspired by Julia Kristeva's writing on the abject in *Powers of Horror*. The abject is found at the intersection of the subject- the identification of the self- and the object- what exists independent of the self. Commonly felt when viewing blood, feces, pus, and at its most intense, the human corpse, the feeling of the abject forces us to confront what Kristeva refers to as "corporeal reality".¹⁶ I was therefore interested in using the packs to reveal the duality between the self and The Other and how they can exist in one body. I saw the creatures of *Limbo* as inherently Other due to the masking of their identity and their irregular movement which shifts between precise rigidity and dazed release. Yet I did not mask the self of their human form, giving rise to uncanny familiarity tinged with the bizarre.

The hoods themselves possessed semiotic significance. Thus far, *Sublimate* addressed fears informed by animals as well as fears informed by nature. As the work entered its final section, I confronted a category of life yet to be represented explicitly: fears of humans and of ourselves. Although *Carnis* and *Panvita* inherently accounted for a human gaze, structures of civilization, society, and identity have only been addressed indirectly. In masking my dancers I placed human individuality at the forefront of *Limbo*'s embodied conversation. I questioned which individuals are truly masked and how this mask influences interaction with the external world.

By donning the hoods, the dancers became untethered from the fetishization of individuality. The implications of this physical masking vary by perspective. In one reading, the

¹⁶ Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: an Essay on Abjection*. Columbia Univ. Press, 1982.

ego is stripped away to allow the dancers to access a new freedom. They become beings liberated from the social and behavioral expectations that humans are often confined to in order to begin a journey outside of the material realm. The release of the ego can be associated with a release of the earthly concerns that accompany the performance of identity. However, another interpretation increases the objectification of the performer. We are able to identify others and find similarities through the performance of identity because we recognize shared humanity. This cannot happen under the cloak of anonymity. The 'Otherness' of the dancers intensifies with the removal of ego which enables the audience to disassociate from the humanity underneath the hoods. These interpretations are not mutually exclusive and I see the validity and influence of each one in the creation of *Limbo*.

Continuing my study of who is truly masked, I recognize that, while the dancer's mask is physical, the one that we wear every day is not. Industrial civilization has given us the ability to curate an image for the external world. The ability to curate our own identities serves to arm and protect ourselves in a multifaceted society that has become increasingly voyeuristic. However, this protection only extends so far. More often than not, the everyday mask is commodified by outside agents who wish to make a profit or control our choices to gain power. This commodification is often accepted as a price for existing in industrial society and its adherence is frequently enforced through the spectatorship of others. We have reached a point in society where the everyday mask is a necessary display for others as well as ourselves. Without it, we would be left vulnerable in external interactions and relationships. In reality we are rarely free to experiment in surrendering our mask, yet on stage I was able to remove these structures.

Limbo

As the dancers completed their physical transition to enter the world of *Limbo*, there was a shift in lighting that created a white, sterile environment. The sound here shifted as well to become echoing and minimal to reinforce my inspiration of the abyss. There was no beat to the music in *Limbo*, continuing the absence of input to the inhabitants of this new world. The dancers stood in a wide second position and swam their arms back and forth as if conjuring an image before them. They repeated this movement until the group rolled off in a cannon to face the back, standing on forced arch. With backs hunched and arms extended in front of their bowed heads, the group used small steps on the balls of their feet to back up towards the center of the space. As they reached the center, each dancer individually released her heels towards the floor and looked up from her hunched position to see the space anew. The group dispersed and began to wander amongst each other to find individual spacing in this new void. On their own timing, each dancer began a combination of trance-like and sharp, snapping gestural movement towards a seated position on the floor. This gestural phrase completed the individual's acclimation to the new environment and evoked a sense of being controlled by an outside force to depict the individual out of control of their transformation process. Once seated, the dancers began repetitively alternating lifting their hands and feet, confusing the body's natural configuration. In creating this movement, I wanted to tell the story of the individual in Limbo who was losing connection to the reality of the corporeal realm. When all of the dancers reached their seated position, two dancers shifted to their stomachs and disjointedly rotated their arms in the sockets. Rolling their heads from side to side with foreheads connected to the floor, these dancers entered a new level of disconnection and deregulation. No longer viewing their own bodies as the seated

dancers do, the bizarre movement accentuated the individual's detachment from a previously known reality, provoking the uncanny.

Through continuous repetition of the hand/foot alternation phrase, one dancer began to fall out of her constant oscillation by using focus to reorient her in the space and momentum driven improvisation to struggle out of the monotony. Her freedom was short-lived, however, and she soon returned to the seated alternation phrase. Yet other individuals quickly followed suit. My intention was to have each dancer choreographically conscious of each other's timing yet visually distinct from the point of view of the audience in order to continue to convey a personal journey while separated from each other. As more dancers fell out of their alternation phrase and the dancers previously situated on their stomachs started to struggle in and out of the floor, one dancer broke out of the indirect, momentum-based improvisation that occupies the rest of the group. Using movement that harkens back to the thrashing and direct choreography exhibited in *Carnis*, the rebelling dancer drew the attention of the other group members out of their individual movement explorations. Rather than feeling comforted by the realization that they are not, in fact, alone in the abyss of *Limbo*, the dancers were reminded of their innate pack-like tendency to correct afflicted group members. The five dancers moved predatorily towards the thrashing individual and took hold of her to pull her into an arcing lift before dropping her into a cross legged position on the ground.

Here the group formed around her to create a decreasing visual pyramid towards the audience. In synchronization, the six dancers began a seated choreography that drew on movement themes from *Sublimate*'s three sections. This phrase was the first frontally oriented choreography seen since the pyramid in *Carnis* and the movement coupled with a shifted tone of

the music gave this section a foreboding sense. The dancers no longer displayed a wandering, soft focus throughout the space and each gesture in their series was precise and meaningful. As the group neared the end of this phrase, they took hold of their heads and sharply turned them to the left. When this happened, the dancer at the tip of the pyramid broke the synchronicity of the group and began shaking her head back and forth, slowly at first and then more rapidly, as if confronting some internal conflict. The five dancers behind her in the pyramid saw this deviation of the group choreography and moved in to attack, an action similar to the intervention following the first solo dancer's irregular movement earlier in *Limbo*. This time the afflicted dancer is hoisted above the group by the other five as she thrashed and struggled to free herself. Yet the pack was stronger than the individual. The lifted dancer suddenly freezes mid-struggle, arching her back and tensing her limbs before being sucked down into the center of the attacking group to be consumed.

To understand this final consumption scene it is necessary to revisit the full trajectory of my work. I was committed to keeping my six dancers on stage for the duration of the work to show all aspects of the circle of life in both the individual and in the group. This became an interesting challenge to navigate when approaching *Limbo* as my initial inspiration was of a blank realm inhabited by a single soul. I questioned how I could incorporate my entire cast in a section that focused on isolation and individual psychology when the pack remained intact. Making a full circle back to the transition from *Carnis* to *Panvita*, I was inspired by the death of the first afflicted soloist. I imagined the journey of this soloist as she experiences life, disease, death, decomposition, and the unknown of what happens after. While she is flanked by the rest of her pack in *Panvita* and *Limbo*, I envisioned a reality where these comrades were truly

figments of a dying mind. Death, and whatever may lay beyond, is a solitary and personal experience for the individual and cannot be understood through the group-think of the pack. The dying soloist unknowingly conjures the images of those who were familiar to her in life to ease her through this time of transition. The illusion is maintained in *Panvita* as there is little interaction between the individuals that could indicate a disconnect. Yet, as the group enters *Limbo*, irregularities begin to arise and are manifested through individual improvisation. The soloist begins to question the nature of her perceptions as the pack turns against one of their own to begin the pyramid phrase. However, her reluctance to let go of the comfort found in the familiar drives her into the frantic gesture phrase, contemplating the life she has left in the material world. The images of the other group members fall in line behind the soloist and execute the same movements in synchronicity, ceasing to embody individual personalities through movement. The thoughts of the soloist and the slow realization of her illusion begins to take over her mind as she shakes her head back and forth, concluding the gesture phrase. She can no longer maintain the familiarity she once knew and her thoughts retaliate against her to disassemble the group. In isolation, it is the dancer's own introspection and psyche that consumes her. Her reluctance to acknowledge and let go of the past material world that she knew becomes her demise as her thoughts, memories, or hallucinations take on a new persona.

As I have discussed throughout this paper, the topic of consumption has played a central role in the development of *Sublimate*. Consumption is approached through several different lenses in each of my three sections, yet *Limbo* depicts both the physical embodiment of consumption as well as the ways we can be consumed by our own thoughts. Visually, this final scene in *Limbo* references fears of cannibalism and ties into the larger theme of a predator/prey

dynamic within the original pack. However, the role of the prey in this section is extended here. While the group of five initially turns on one of their own, the focus of the predator is quickly taken outwards.

Two dancers who were previously engrossed in the consumption of the soloist became distracted by something behind them. As if hearing a foreign sound or smelling something unfamiliar, the two slowly turned to inspect the nature of this outside stimuli. They were greeted by an abundance of new prey: the audience. Breaking the fourth wall a second time, the two dancers began to crawl animalistically towards the audience. This time, however, their crawl on all-fours morphed into a crouched, distorted walk, abandoning their hands and becoming fully upright by moving forward on their feet with hands hanging down in front of their advancing bodies. Their heads cocked left and right as if inspecting their potential prey and the lights dimmed to black as the dancers approached the feet of the first row of audience members.

I used this quasi-human walk out of their previous animalistic crawl to create a story of morphing identities. By creating a narrative where the creaturely individual starts to become more human, I develop a space for the dancers to integrate with the viewer. Although the two advancing dancers appear physically different from the audience in terms of movement quality and physical appearance, I was interested in creating a dynamic where viewers could see similarities in themselves and the performers. Through an inherently human form and the progressively humanoid movement style, I developed an environment for the creatures on stage and the human viewers to relate to each other. The identification of similarities between creature and human or dancer and viewer is central to the understanding of *Sublimate*. Alan Watts articulates this in *The Book*, saying,

Every individual is an expression of the whole realm of nature, a unique action of the total universe. This fact is rarely, if ever, experienced by most individuals. Even those who know it to be true in theory do not sense or feel it, but continue to be aware of themselves as isolated "egos" inside bags of skin. (Watts 13)

I believe that we can come closer to understanding this fact by identifying embodied similarities between ourselves and the external world. With these creatures slowly becoming adversaries, the audience must potentially navigate an experience of threat. As the dancers merge towards the audience, their humanity is not detectable and the animal nature must be contended with. My unsatisfied curiosity lies in learning how this moment affected the viewers.

Reentry into the audience also connects *Limbo* to choreographic and conceptual elements of *Carnis* and *Panvita*. *Carnis* begins with an emergence from the audience: dancers slither and crawl from between seats and in front of the light line. In starting *Sublimate* by placing the audience and dancers in an equal spatial relationship, I began an investigation into voyeurism that continued through to this final moment in *Limbo*.

In hinting at a cyclical nature of this work while not making this reference explicit, I repeated both the sentiments of nature's breaking down to fertilize new growth as well as the questionable notion that death ends life. Through references to decomposition and the cycle of life and death to life renewed, *Panvita* foreshadows a cycle that begins again. *Sublimate* works to create a looping environment that reflects the natural process of life. This theme becomes recognizable in the ending performer-audience relationship and I further question the location of *Sublimate*'s ending in the final bow.

After putting so much energy into crafting the realm of *Sublimate*, I suspected that the inclusion of a bow would break the otherworldly spell and undermine my intentions. I set out to make the audience experience discomfort and believed that a bow's traditional lightheartedness would negate the work's philosophical confrontation. I was therefore interested in shifting the expected presentational attitude commonly seen to enable the dancers to continue to exist in the environment of the piece. For the bow, the dancers removed their hoods as the lights came up, seeming to break their creaturely identity as they smiled for the audience. Yet to exit the stage, the dancers take their hoods in their mouths and crawl to the wings as a reformed pack. The line between the world of *Sublimate* and the 'real world' becomes ambiguous through this action. Here I invite the question of where the creatures go once they leave the stage. Does the stage confine them, necessitating a dematerialization once the viewer is no longer involved? Or are these creatures in control to exist freely in the realm of reality? The answer to these questions are uncertain and the audience is left to determine the truth on their own.

Demystifying the Title

In choosing a title for my culminating BFA piece I needed to uncover the most salient aspects of each section and distill them to find a verbalized essence in my work. I chose this title because of the multitude of definitions and interpretations that came with it. This word's significance in the study of the natural world, human psychology, religious theory, and phenomenological attitudes solidified my conceptual intentions for this choreography.

In psychology, to sublimate is to “divert the expression of an instinctual desire or impulse from its unacceptable form to one that is considered more socially or culturally acceptable.”¹⁷ These “instinctual desires or impulses” commonly refer to feelings of aggression, sadness, anxiety, or sexual impulse. While there are clear situations where these impulses are blatantly unacceptable, such as being at work or in a place of worship, there is an implication that these instincts are *always* unacceptable to act upon.¹⁸ *Carnis* directly relates to our diversion of innate impulses as we recognize our own animalistic tendencies. Whether consciously or subconsciously, sublimation keeps us from showing our true animal nature when provoked and protects ourselves and those around us from physical or social harm. Yet in policing and restricting our own nature and freedom of primal expression, further distance from our natural roots is created. It is important to note that I am not advocating for the abolition of the social doctrines which prohibit acting upon instinctual desires. Rather, I believe we must understand the existence of the coping mechanisms that humans have developed to deal with societal pressures of conformity. Instinctual desires and impulses cannot be trained out of human psychology regardless of the constraints that are constructed to inhibit “acting out”- or rather acting upon- which speaks to the power of our animalistic nature.

A second definition of the word sublimate is derived from chemistry. Used in reference to phase transition, sublimation occurs when a substance passes directly from a solid state to a vapor state without first transitioning into its liquid form. Naturally, this type of phase transition is unusual for most substances yet scientists are more commonly able to induce sublimation in a

¹⁷ “Sublimate.” *Merriam-Webster*, Merriam-Webster, www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/sublimate.

¹⁸ *Cultural Zoo : Animals in the Human Mind and its Sublimation*, edited by Salman Akhtar, and Vamik D. Volkan, Karnac Books, 2014. ProQuest Ebook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ucb/detail.action?docID=1642532>.

laboratory. When done in a lab, the purpose of sublimation is often to produce a more pure form of a solid substance.¹⁹ In my work I represent this alchemy in the transition from *Panvita* to *Limbo*. Relying specifically on costuming to visually communicate this shift, I showed the dancer's passage from the corporeal, solid realm of the physical body to the ethereal realm of the spirit consciousness.

Finally, I must draw attention to the antithetic nature in the linguistic origin of the word sublimate. Beginning with the roots of sublimate's earlier developed relatives, "subliminal" and "sublime", the basic etymology stems from a combination of the Latin preposition *sub-*, meaning both "under, below" and "up to, towards", and *limen*, meaning "threshold, limit". However the meaning of these two visually similar words is quite contrasting. "Subliminal" makes use of the first and most commonly utilized definition of *sub-* to translate to "below the threshold (of consciousness)".²⁰ This definition links to the psychological *subconscious* and is employed in the construction of the psychoanalytical term "sublimate". On the other hand, "sublime", which has been used historically in reference to the metaphysical as well as in my own aesthetic assessment of awe, draws upon the second definition of the preposition *sub-*. "Sublime" therefore means "approaching the limit". Later taking on a religious context, "sublime" began to mean "lofty, exalted, purified" which triggered its adoption in by alchemists in the sixteenth century and carries through to today's use of "sublimate" in chemistry.²¹

¹⁹ "Sublimation." *Illustrated Glossary of Organic Chemistry*, University of California, Los Angeles, www.chem.ucla.edu/~harding/IGOC/S/sublimation.html.

²⁰ Cohn, Jan, and Thomas H. Miles. "The Sublime: In Alchemy, Aesthetics and Psychoanalysis." *Modern Philology*, vol. 74, no. 3, 1977, pp. 289–304., doi:10.1086/390726.

²¹ *Ibid.*

Jan Cohn and Thomas H. Miles identify the paradoxical nature inherent in the etymology of “sublimate”. In their article, *The Sublime: In Alchemy, Aesthetics and Psychoanalysis*, they explain,

[...] the layman will recognize that both words are related to sublime and will sense that sublimation-like the word sublime-has something to do with "up," and that subliminal, oddly, has something to do with "down"-unlike the word sublime. Sublimation has a number of definitions, generally denoting either elevation to a higher state or rank, or transmutation into a higher or purer condition; similar meanings attach to sublime: that which is lofty or elevated... The standard etymologies for sublime and subliminal reinforce the absolute contradiction of their meaning while failing to clarify that contradiction. (Cohn, Miles 289)

Through this analysis, *sub-* means both “above” and “below”. *Sublimate* embodies this apparent contradiction in themes of decomposition/descent into ascension/rebirth and the in-betweenness inherent in Dante’s conceptualization of Limbo. I reconcile this linguistic inconsistency by disrupting the connotations of “above” and “below” in *Sublimate*. By eliminating the traditional narrative arc that begins at a low point of action to build to the high climax, *Carnis* confuses the antique notion of “rising action”. In *Panvita*, decomposition becomes a form of ascension, for it is only through a return to the earth that the dancers can reach the elevated state of *Limbo*. Finally, *Limbo* is the ultimate embrace of the paradox found in the origins of *sub-*. Dante’s formulation of Limbo as the first circle of Hell indicates a subterranean nature while the *Limbo* of *Sublimate* explores the elevation of human consciousness through the shedding of ego. I

solidify the oscillation between “above” and “below” in *Limbo*’s own definition: “an intermediate or transitional place or state”.²²

Conclusion

Our animal instincts for survival and our intuitive sense of threat cannot be trained out of us regardless of the rules that society dictates to regulate behavior and the institutions that distance humans from our fundamental place in nature. The fear of death and our understanding of the arc of life inform how we interact with and conceptualize our existence in the natural world. In my creation of *Sublimate*, I kinesthetically studied this connection while solidifying my own views on the inevitability of death and finding new ways to reconcile my fears of oblivion and finality.

²² “Limbo.” *Merriam-Webster*, Merriam-Webster, www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/limbo.

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